

ORDEAL OF THE RING

Drawings by Wladyslaw T. Benda

By MICHAEL WHITE

LANE says that as he didn't see any sign warning him of "No Landing" he was unaware of trespass on the Maharaja of Jholor's exclusive private property. Likely enough no one but a venturesome American would have thought of getting up before sunrise to appropriate a crazy native boat, and drop down the Jholor River just to see where it went.

Anyway, that was how he came to step ashore at a domed marble pavilion, rising out of the dawn mist like some fairy creation in silver and rose pink. His approach roused a sleeping nuggar on the bottom step to slide noiselessly back into the water, and moved two sentinel cranes to spread their wings in lazy flight. Lane strolled up the steps whistling softly to himself; for the dream spirit of the hour was upon him, and he felt in a reflective mood. He reached a wide platform on which stood the pavilion, inclosed by screens of marble fretwork. Beyond lay gardens of exotic plants glistening as with liquid jewels. Lane was gazing on these when he became conscious that he was being watched in turn.

"*Qua hai?*" [Who is there?] a voice fell pleasantly but with just a shade of alarm on his ear.

Lane swung half round, to notice a girl standing in the opening between two of the marble screens. He had heard much of the physical attractions of Hindu women; but so far he had been permitted to inspect only those of the peasant class, and he expressed much disappointment. But this girl, poised like a classic figure, draped in the filmy, silken folds of her brightly-colored, richly embroidered sari, and with eyes of mysterious depths directed wonderingly upon him, would have been a rare beauty in any land. For a moment Lane stood speechless in suddenly kindled admiration.

"What do you want?" she again questioned.

Lane bowed politely as he pulled himself together to explain his presence in the Hindustani he had picked up during a cold season wandering in India.

"You came in this?" she pointed to the tub of a boat secured to the bottom step of the pavilion. She spoke as if she might have been expecting some Prince in a gilded barge of state and was a bit disappointed.

"Yes—er—in that," nodded Lane half apologetically; for he felt somehow that he ought to have arrived piloted by a couple of swans, after the fashion of Lohengrin in Wagner's opera.

She thought a little, regarding him curiously the while. Presently she parted her lips and laughed as if after all it was a rather good joke. Lane promptly reciprocated her humor, and since she offered no objection moved nearer.

"Do you know Doorah the fortune teller?" She surprised him by speaking in English, which she said she had learned from the fortune teller.

"No; so far I haven't made her acquaintance," replied Lane.

"*Ahl!* Well, it was Doorah who foretold that he would come by the river at sunrise some morning; but she did not describe him as at all like you. He was to wear a plumed helmet, armor of gold inlay, splendid jewels, with a big tulwar at his side. No, he was to be quite different from you," she shook her head.

"I'm terribly sorry about it," put in Lane, regretfully contrasting his rather-the-worse-for-wear traveling outfit with the heroic ideal presented. "Of course had I known Doorah and all this, I should have tried to do better. As it is I'm nothing but a vagabond intruder, for which I ask your pardon; but," he added, "I assure you a much interested one. If you will tell me a little of—of yourself and this place, I shall be forever grateful."

She hesitated a moment; then, apparently gathering intuitively that he was to be trusted, granted his request. "My name is Kesineh. I am a niece and adopted daughter of the Maharaja of Jholor."

Lane acknowledged his complete readiness to believe that she was a Princess of Rajput stock, undeniably the best in all India.



"This place," she went on, "is used as a landing for the zenana. I come here sometimes in the cool of early morning or evening to bathe or feed the birds."

"But I understood you were expecting someone," ventured Lane.

"Oh, no!" she shook her head. "I do not truly believe in Doorah's talk, because no one would dare to land here."

"Um—well—it seems that I have done so."

"Yes, that is very bad," she nodded seriously.

"Then I'd better go away at once."

"N-no," she staved him. "You did not intend; so perhaps you are not to blame. Would you like to see the bathing pool before you depart?" she asked. "It is said no other compares with it in this country."

Lane vowed that he was eager to follow any suggestion she made. Thereupon she motioned him to follow her into the pavilion. As Lane stared round, an amber light filtering through marble screens revealed a wealth of semiprecious stones lavished in floral designs upon the interior. In places richly carved fountains intended to spray perfumed water overlooked a pool of crystal water. From a small balcony sprung at the base of the domed roof a winding runway descended into the pool. Kesineh was explaining what great fun it was to turn a stream of water into the runway and splash down one after another, when she cut off her words suddenly.

"*Mahadit!*" she exclaimed in startled accents. "Someone is coming!"

SHE waited a moment listening intently. Presently she spoke half to herself. "If it be one of the zenana women, it will not matter so much. Before now I have known of these meetings in other places."

She listened again while the patter of footsteps on the gravelled path became distinctly audible. She peeped through a fern pattern in one of the screens.

"The gods protect us!" she cried in terror under her breath. "It is the Maharaja himself!" She impulsively drew Lane back into part concealment under the runway. "Hush!" she swept a hand lightly upon his mouth. "Be more quiet than one who, looking on a tiger, knows not whether he will remain unseen, or neither of us will behold this sunset."

The footsteps ascended the pavilion platform with a firm tread and halted. Lane and his companion waited

in strained suspense, devoutly hoping that the Maharaja would pass on without entering the pavilion. But presently his form appeared in one of the entrances. He looked about him, and for a moment directed his gaze under the runway. With one hand supporting the girl Lane could feel a shiver run through her frame. It was hardly possible that they had not been seen. Yet he moved on, a grave, stately figure, glancing neither to the right hand nor the left. He passed under the runway, and they could almost have touched his garments; but by no word or sign did he show that he recognized their presence. In a little he was gone.

"Great Powers!" Lane's pent up feeling burst forth. "That was the closest call I ever had."

"*Ahl!* but do not doubt that he saw us," cried Kesineh. "It would have been better a thousand times had he spoken, had he charged us with a crime and cursed us; but his Rajput pride would never permit him to notice this thing openly. Go—go away by your boat," she thrust him from the pavilion. "Forget that you were ever here, and let your tongue be always silent. Perhaps then the Maharaja's anger will not fall upon you."

"But how about his treatment of you?" Lane protested.

"For me nothing can be done. What happens will be Kismet. Go!" she besought him. "Every moment you stay will make it worse for me. *Ahl!* To anyone who asks swear by all your gods that you have never set eyes on me. That is to save yourself. Farewell!"

His impulse was to vow that he would never forget or deny her; but she turned and sped from him. He watched her disappear in the shrubbery of a garden path. He waited to see if the Maharaja would return to demand an explanation; but since he seemed to have gone mysteriously on his way Lane went thoughtfully down to his boat.

WHEN Lane returned to the dak bungalow, where he was a passing guest, his servant Hussein had apparently developed a high-power attack of nerves. In serving breakfast he dropped the dishes and looked as if he expected a thunderbolt to fall any moment. At last Lane demanded to know what it all meant.

"Oh, Sir!" Hussein glanced over his shoulder in an uneasy manner. "Do you not think we had better leave this place at once?"

"Why so?"

"Sir, there has been one of the Maharaja's people here. If the Presence will pardon this slave, assuredly your Honor has done a very unwise thing."

"Is that so?" ejaculated Lane. "News seems to travel pretty quickly by the underground route in this country. What did the Maharaja's messenger or detective say?"

Hussein gave Lane to understand that in view of what had happened the Sahib—as a Sahib—was offered a chance to get out of Jholor without delay.

"Since if we stay here we shall both be in unknown graves very shortly," almost wept Hussein, "doubtless I have your Lordship's order to hire and pack a swift tonga."

"No, you have not," replied Lane decisively. "Instead I want you to find out what is going on at the palace. Before I leave Jholor I intend to be certain that no one else is going to suffer for my unintentional trespass. Do you understand me?"

"Sir, I cannot do that," protested Hussein. "Does not the Sahib know that for me to ask about the Maharaja's zenana would be a crime? My back would be lucky to escape with a good stick beating. Much better that your Honor forgets all about the Maharaja's zenana, and that we shake the dust of this dangerous place off our feet."

"All right," nodded Lane indifferently. "I know you can manage to pick up the information if you wish; but as I can't compel you to stay, you can go. Only

you lose this month's pay, and the hundred rupees I promised at the end of the trip."

The effect of the money threat on Hussein was instantaneous. While vowing that he cared nothing for it, and that Lane's safety was his one anxiety in life, still he would get in touch with some of the palace servants. By Allah's favor and a few rupees—charged to Lane's account—it might be their lips would be opened.

LATER Hussein went off, leaving Lane to reflect on the probable outcome of his morning adventure. He knew of course that to trespass on a native Prince's zenana preserve was a crime, and that something unpleasant would most likely happen to him if he remained in Jholor. But he put all that aside in growing concern for Princess Kesineh. Her terror when the Maharaja appeared was manifest. It lent confirmation to the wayside stories Lane had heard of various forms of punishment visited on girls of high rank caught in a breach of the ironclad rule of seclusion. He didn't at all like the idea of being the cause of her enduring something specially refined in the way of torture. These haunting thoughts kept him in suspense all day.

Night fell without Hussein's return. During most of it Lane paced the dak bungalow veranda with a pistol handy in his pocket. But though he imagined he was being watched, that each clump of bamboo in the compound concealed a cut-throat emissary of the Maharaja's, no attack was made. Only at intervals was the stillness of an Indian night broken by the long drawn out howling of jackals.

With morning reappeared Hussein.

"Well," questioned Lane eagerly, "what has happened? Have you been able to find out anything about Princess Kesineh?"

"Sir," began Hussein, who invariably made the most of the least exertion, "after great difficulty I succeeded in talking with one of the zenana *ayahs* [maids]. I called her *buchari* [little woman] and other things not true. For this may I be forgiven, since I cannot afford another wife!"

"Let's hope she didn't take you too seriously, Hussein. Anyway, what did she say? Get ahead!"

"She told me, Sir, that the Princess Kesineh was charged with the great crime of an illicit meeting with a Sahib. She denied it; but to prove her innocence must pass the Ordeal of the Ring."

"What is that?" interrogated Lane.

"The Ordeal of the Ring is an ancient Jholor custom to establish in such cases the guilt or innocence of a woman. A ring is dropped into a silver vase. If she seizes the ring, she is innocent."

"That doesn't seem hard," remarked Lane.

"Sahib, it is made very hard. Besides the ring something else is put in the vase. Often it is an acid water which burns the flesh, or sharp blades which cut into it when the hand gropes for the ring. But one cannot see what is in the vase, because the ordeal is held in a shaded hall or some place where there is little light. The real test lies in the hand being withdrawn without burn, scar, or scratch. Very seldom, Sir, has that happened."

"You mean that she is practically convicted in advance?"

"All I know in this case is that the ayah said the Princess Kesineh's grave was even now being prepared."

"Great Heavens!" cried Lane, aghast. "When does the infernal ordeal take place?"

"This day at sunset."

Lane swung upon his heel stirred to the utmost. He thought quickly to make up a line of action. "I'm going to see the Maharaja right away," he announced. "I can't allow this awful thing to happen."

"Sir," warned Hussein, "assuredly you will be walking into the lion's grasp."

"I don't care a hang! At any rate, the Maharaja can't say I ran off like a cur. I'm told these Rajput Princes have a high idea of chivalry. Maybe I can appeal to his sense of it."

"Then, Sir," advised Hussein, "say very little. Trust rather to your voluntarily placing yourself in his hands."



"Lane thrust his arm into the deadly vase."

He will know why you have come, and judge of your action. Otherwise, by some unlucky reference to the Princess, you may inflame his anger, and all be lost."

THIS time Lane drove to the palace in the only vehicle that Jholor possessed. It was a ramshackle outfit; but since custom decreed that a Sahib could not go on foot without loss of caste, Lane hoped he was so much to the good by way of required impression.

When he made his object known the Maharaja's servants looked as if they thought Lane was courageous to the point of lunacy. He was kept waiting in an inner court for a considerable period; but was at last summoned to the Maharaja's presence. The Maharaja received him on a wide balcony overlooking the river that had originally tempted him to the present situation. He directed on Lane a searching gaze from under dark brows. Lane returned it frankly, noticing that the Maharaja's features wore the same impassive, sphinxlike expression that had stamped them when he passed through the pavilion.

"I sent a message for you to leave Jholor because I do not want questions asked about you," presently spoke the Maharaja. "Why are you still here?"

Lane recollected Hussein's warning and answered guardedly, "That your Highness may judge between an honorable man and a coward."

The Maharaja started. "Say you so?" he exclaimed. "You act like a Rajput. What is it you want?"

"To explain a certain matter so that an entirely innocent person may not suffer."

The Maharaja shook his head. "There is nothing to be explained," he said. "I saw with my own eyes that which can be decided only according to our custom."

Lane felt like denouncing the custom as a rotten limb of barbarity, but reckoned it best to hold back both sentiment and temper. "If your Highness will listen—" he began.

But the Maharaja broke in abruptly. "I know what you would say. As a Sahib you do not understand us. That is the reason you are still alive. The other knew,

and so can plead no excuse. You had better go away."

"I do not intend to leave this place," asserted Lane, "until your Highness has at least promised that the other shall have fair justice."

The Maharaja again looked on Lane fixedly. He seemed to admire the American's pluck. "Listen!" he slightly raised a hand. "I will tell you all I can do. This matter has passed beyond me into the hands of the Brahmans. They have decreed an Ordeal of the Ring. If you wish to take the other's place, that I will grant because you have come here fearlessly. Upon you then will depend proof of her guilt or innocence, and with her you may expect whatever happens."

"I accept your Highness's offer," promptly agreed Lane.

"*Wallah!* Good! Then you can return to the palace at an hour before sundown. Thus much will I promise on the word of a Rajput."

LANE spent the intervening time settling up his affairs. He wrote several letters to be mailed by Hussein should luck go against him and he be not heard of again outside the palace walls. But he purposed holding on to any chance that might help or prove a means of escape. A point of importance that impressed him was foreknowledge of what would be placed in the vase beside the ring. To that end he sent Hussein on further news gathering from his ayah friend.

But this time Hussein returned ruefully defeated. "That woman," complained Hussein bitterly, "is not to be depended on. Before she gave me smiles and soft words; now she declares she has found out I am a low-caste Mohammedan pig. She threatened me with a beating. But from another I learned that the ordeal is in charge of the Chief Brahmin, who is a relentless man. Therefore I fear there is no hope."

"None certainly, if one gives up at the start," remarked Lane with pinched brow. "But the use of brain stuff, Hussein, will sometimes find a way out."

He was moving back and forth nervously while speaking. Presently an idea hopped out of memory

which might lead to discovering what lay in the vase besides the ring. Before leaving home a friend had bestowed on him as a parting gift one of those pocket combination contrivances more interesting as entertaining toys than of practical use. This particular object contained a small electric lamp. The disk was hardly larger than a ten-cent piece; but the whole could fortunately be concealed easily within a coat sleeve. It occurred to Lane that by dropping the miniature electric lamp into the vase it ought to reveal to him the ring and whatever else was placed there as a trap. Clearly that much advantage would be on his side before thrusting in his hand. He had stowed it away somewhere in his baggage, and had almost forgotten its existence. He set Hussein to work on a hunt through tin-lined trunks. Together they tossed things around until the pocket lamp turned up in an unlikely case of emergency remedies.

"Good! Good!" he exclaimed, as he snapped the switch and a light glowed in the small disk. "About what size is the vase, Hussein?"

"I have not seen it, Sir; but I am told it is large enough for an arm to be inserted nearly as far as the shoulder."

"Well, this ought to give light enough to show up the interior. I guess I'd better bind it with string in case I'm compelled to drop it inside. The clink of metal might rouse suspicion."

The discovery of the pocket lamp in the medicine case gave Lane another idea. He secreted some tablets that in the last resort would prevent either the girl or himself suffering from physical torture. Then thrusting a pistol into his pocket to be used previously to the tablets, and the lamp held by a single thread easily snapped up his sleeve, he again set out for the palace,

HIS nerves were pretty high strung. Consequently, when received by a sinister group of the Maharaja's armed retainers and requested to submit to being blindfolded, Lane drew back with suspicion.

"How do I know," he demanded, "if this is not

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ORDEAL OF THE RING

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some trick to take me at a disadvantage?"

"The Sahib will please remember," an officer of the retainers spoke, "that if the Maharaja did not intend to keep his word, would the Sahib have left the palace this morning? Who ever heard that a Rajput Prince broke faith?"

"Then why this blindfold? Is it part of the ordeal?" Lane realized that if such were its purpose his plan of the lamp would fail.

"No," answered the officer. "It is because the Sahib is to be taken through a part of the zenana not permitted to the sight of men."

"Oh, all right then," agreed Lane.

When the blindfolding was done he was led into the zenana precincts. He assumed that he was given in charge of the zenana guards, who conducted him through endless corridors and passages. Now and then his ears caught whispering voices intimating that he was an object of much interest to fair or other inmates. Presently he was halted. He heard louder talk, and someone was placed at his side. Then into one of his hands was thrust a smaller hand, and he felt the touch of soft silk. He pressed the smaller hand to receive a response. No word was exchanged; but he had no doubt regarding the identity of his companion. So on again.

In a little while gravel under foot informed him they were traversing a path. The tinkling splash of a fountain and the heavy perfume of flowers suggested a garden. At last Lane's foot touched a step. They were assisted up a flight of these to a platform. His blindfold was removed.

He stared round in momentary surprise; for he found that the pavilion where the trouble had originated was selected for the ordeal. An awning had been spread over part of the platform. Under this were grouped the Maharaja with his nobles. They evidently regarded it as a state occasion; for their gorgeous robes blazed with jewels. But a figure standing out from them was in striking contrast. This was the chief Brahman and legal accuser. Pride, scorn, and relentless cruelty marked his thin features. For background the dome and turrets of the pavilion were draped in a royal purple hue of sunset. In far distance the blood-red orb of the sun itself touched the horizon and flooded the waters of the river below a deep crimson. On a low stand before the chief Brahman rested the fatal vase. It was of pure silver, ornately chased in designs of Hindu deities.

Presently the accused were summoned under the awning. The Maharaja addressed Lane.

"Do you still wish to perform the ordeal?"

"I do," Lane asserted.

"And you accept the Sahib?" was demanded of the girl.

According to the custom she drew from her wrist a gold bracelet, which she laid before the vase.

Lane was directed to pick up the bracelet as his pledge on her behalf. He complied promptly.

"Then all is now prepared!" said the Maharaja.

Lane stepped up to the vase and inspected it closely. Down through its neck he could see nothing. Beneath the awning and

in the fast waning light the interior was all in black shadow. Doubtless this had been carefully calculated. He asked permission if he might previously testify on oath the girl's innocence, as was performed in his own country.

This was granted.

As Lane professed a long-drawn-out oath he laid both hands over the neck of the vase. In this manner he managed to conceal adroitly his action of dropping the electric pocket lamp into the vase. It seemed to fall short of the bottom, with no resulting dull or other sound. He straightened himself, bent over, and peered into the vase. The small, glowing light revealed a dark, coiled mass, also a flat head with a pair of vicious, gleaming eyes. He choked down an impulsive cry of horror as he realized that the other object in the vase was a cobra. Assuredly the chance of any hand inserted escaping a death stroke was remote!

He moistened his suddenly parched lips with his tongue, and looked again into the vase. The fall of the pocket lamp with its steady light had evidently stirred the serpent. Its mass was uncoiling, its head slowly rising to the neck of the vase. Lane nerved himself to the ordeal he decided upon. He rested his open hand just touching the rim of the vase and waited. By fractions of an inch crept that sinister head upward. Presently a forked tongue darted above the rim, and the cobra's head appeared.

With a lightning sweep Lane grasped it by the neck immediately under the jaws. His fingers closed in a viselike grip, with his thumb nail pressing in upon the cobra's vertebra. The serpent fairly leaped out of the vase, threshing three feet of its supple body, and winding it in coils around Lane's arm. Lane forced all the muscles of his wrist and hand to a strangulating grip. Thus for a tense period of mental and physical strain he struggled with the serpent for mastery.

As the conflict went on beaters entered the platform with torches. The lurid flames showed Lane's face paled to an ashen hue, with the sweat dripping from his forehead. In a little the cobra's jaws, displaying its deadly fangs, fell apart, and its coils dropped listlessly from Lane's arm. Lane swung it back and hurled the cobra at the chief Brahman's feet.

"Ugh! Ugh!" not unlike grunts of applause ran from mouth to mouth among the Maharaja's nobles.

Lane turned to the vase. He thrust in his arm and secured the ring, also the small pocket electric lamp. The latter he dropped into his pocket; the former he set on the girl's trembling finger. Then he held out his hand before the Maharaja.

"Your Highness can see there is neither burn, cut, nor scratch upon it. Has not the [honor Ordeal of the Ring been fulfilled, with innocence proved?"

The Maharaja glanced from side to side upon the faces of his nobles, gathering approval from them. "Even so," he gravely decided. "Also, by our custom, to the woman's defender belongs the silver vase, filled with gold mohars if it be her wish. Lo, you may now both go where you will!"

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tate down in Hertfordshire. He is a member too of the club at which I am just going to lunch.

"You don't say so!" Smith exclaimed, with interest. "Now I wonder whether you could put me in the way of finding him?"

Jermyn glanced at his watch. "If he is in town at all," he said, "he will probably be at the club. Come along and have luncheon with me. If he isn't there, I can find out from someone where he is. He has a very large circle of friends. He goes down to the Riviera every season, I believe; but it's too early for him to have made a move yet. Very good time, I should think, to catch him in town."

"Well, that's really very kind of you, Smith declared. "If it's wholly agreeable to you, I should be delighted."

"It's a quarter to one now," Jermyn remarked. "I have been working all the morning, and am really out for a little exercise. If you're in no particular hurry, we might walk to the top of Bond street and back again. I want to call at my shirt maker's, and I suppose I am Englishman enough to love walking in this particular street."

"I am with you all the time," Smith answered with alacrity, as they strolled off. "It's a commonplace, poky looking little thoroughfare to anyone that's been used to Fifth avenue; but I am not going to say that it hasn't points. The women, for instance. Finest women in the world! Never saw anything like them. Such complexions! Gee! Here's a lovely woman coming now! What a carriage! What a figure!"

Jermyn smiled faintly. "You ought to recognize her," he said. "That is the Duchesse de Sayers; to whom, by the by, I am engaged to be married."

"Now that's interesting," Smith declared. "But I thought—I understood—I had an idea—"

THEY were face to face with Lucille now. She was dressed as usual in perfect taste, a distinguished and distinctive figure. Some change seemed to have come over her during the last few steps. The brilliant smile with which she had welcomed them had passed from her face. She was looking steadily at Smith.

"Let me assure you," Jermyn said, as they paused, "that Mr. Smith isn't a night-

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THE WAY OF THESE WOMEN

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myself how a marriage made like ours could ever be a successful one. I know it can never be successful. Still I shall do my best now. I shall do my best always—up to a certain point.

She looked at him inquiringly. For a few moments he said nothing, watching the people pass in and out of the place. Then he turned once more to his companion.

"Sybil," he said, "Sybil, there will always be this in my heart: Lucille is to be my wife, and I shall give her exactly what the law demands; but between you and me there is something else. There is the love that must have in it always a spark of divinity, because for both of us it is leavened with self-sacrifice. That is how it will always be to me. Now we have finished with serious subjects. You must decide for yourself whether it shall be more muffins or some of those little cakes; or we can talk over what we are going to give Mary for a Christmas present; or shall we discuss exactly how you are going to say those few lines at the end of the second act, which Jameson and I can't agree about?"

She lifted her veil—there was no need to

keep it down any longer. "One at a time, please," she laughed. "To begin with, then, I want another muffin."

CHAPTER XXVI

IN Bond street the next morning Jermyn met Norden Smith.

"How long are you up for?" the former asked.

"Well, I'm not altogether sure," Smith replied. "Anyway, when I've finished with London I shall be getting home again before very long. I have had a very pleasant tour over here, and have got through half of the business that brought me most satisfactorily. By the by," he added, "you don't happen to know anything of a fellow countryman of mine, a Mr. Chalmers—Aaron Chalmers they call him? He is better known over on this side, I think, than with us. He has spent the last fifteen years of his life in Europe, with only an occasional visit to New York. Chap not much older than you are, I should say."

"I know him quite well," Jermyn admitted; "or rather, perhaps I should say I know of him quite well. He has a large es-